

Terror management theory



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The effects of terror management theory on political decisions

Summary

The terror management theory suggests that feelings of anxiety and fear are caused by thoughts of death (mortality salience) which may affect our thoughts, decisions and actions. The fear/anxiety caused triggers off defence mechanisms which cause individuals to feel closer to their beliefs and what they regard as a good and valued way of living (cultural worldview). The study will be looking at how the manipulation of mortality salience affects the ratings of two world leaders, predicting that they will rate highest the world leader which identifies the most with their cultural worldview. The participants will be British University students and the design of the study is an independent measures design. The participants will be asked to fill in an identification scale on being British, a word search where the experimental condition will contain mortality salience and the control condition will not, they will also be asked to fill in small maths calculations and they will be finally asked to rate two world leaders (England's prime minister Gordon Brown and Russia's president Dmitry Medvedev) on a scale indicating how strongly they feel about the statements about each world leader. The ethical issues in the experiment are confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity, mortality salience and the use of findings. These issues will be dealt with by gaining presumed consent, the right to withdraw from the experiment at any time and debriefing each participant at the end to make sure they are comfortable and satisfied with the information they provided. Mortality salience will be kept as minimal as possible via using a word search and a distracter task which will be used afterwards to ensure that as little harm or no harm at all is caused to the participants.

Introduction

Terror management theory was developed by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon and Tom Pyszczynski and is based on death. Humans are unique as they are the only living species that are aware of their inevitable death and this causes fear (terror) which would make carrying on with daily tasks impossible. Therefore, it is suggested that when an individual is reminded of death (mortality salience) they instantly use two defence mechanisms to protect themselves and get rid of these thoughts of death. The first defence mechanism is when an individual has their own personal views and standards on how they should live their life and therefore, individuals strive to meet those standards to feel as valued members of society (cultural worldview). Culture also provides individuals with symbolic immortality such as, being part of families and ethnic groups, because even after their mortality these groups will still exist and individuals will still be remembered as parts of them. The second defence mechanism is self-esteem which reduces anxiety when self-esteem is high and this is achieved by individuals believing and maintaining that they live up to the standards that are parts of their cultural worldview. When individuals are successful this causes high self-esteem which reduces the anxiety caused by threats.

Furthermore, when others have the same cultural worldview as ours (in groupers) it suggests that our view is right and we need this confirmation from others to keep believing in our cultural worldviews. However, defence mechanisms are triggered off when there are threats against one's world view and beliefs. The thought of death and other individuals with different cultural worldviews (out groupers) could challenge our beliefs leaving us with

feelings of anxiety which makes individuals want to live up to their cultural worldviews even more.

Many studies have tested the mortality salience hypothesis such as Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski and Lyon (1989) who used twenty two judges in a study where half of the judges were reminded of their own death (mortality salience), before setting bail to a prostitute and the other half were not. The judges who were reminded of their death set bail at \$450 and judges who were not reminded of their death set bail at \$50. This shows that the knowledge of death causes individuals to maintain their cultural worldviews which is reflected onto the amount of bail set as generally prostitution would be seen as wrong in many individuals cultural worldview.

The terror management theory also assumes that when people are reminded of death this affects their decisions towards certain important issues such as politics. Studies show that when mortality is salient many individuals support people with the same political views as their selves and act hostile and negatively towards people with different political views. For example, Landau et al. (2004) found that when individuals were reminded of the 9/11 attacks they seemed to be more supportive of President Bush whereas, in control conditions less than half supported his decisions. This shows us that the thought of death can have effects on our political decisions and views and this knowledge of fear seems to be used by politicians to receive more support from the public. Other studies have also showed that death increases nationalism. In one study on American participants, when they were reminded of death they were more positive towards people who

thought positively of America and were more negative towards people who thought negatively of America (Greenberg et al., 1990). Different countries also found similar results such as in Germany when Germans were reminded of death they sat closer to other Germans and sat further away from Turks (Ochsman and Mathay, 1994).

These studies show us that when individuals are afraid of their mortality they feel closer to their cultural worldviews than ever before as a way of protecting themselves. This causes attitudes and beliefs to strengthen which in turn causes individuals to view any other belief as wrong and negative. This may cause extreme behaviour such as terrorist attacks, hate crimes and violence. As a result of all of these, individuals would feel closer to a president who knows exactly what they are doing, are devoted and sending out a strong message.

Rationale (purpose) and aims of study: The aim of the study is to show that thoughts of death affect our lives and the decisions we make, including decisions about politics. The study will be testing to see how British participants will react towards their very own world leader prime minister Gordon Brown and another world leader, Dmitry Medvedev Russia's president. Participants should prefer Gordon Brown rather than the other world leader when reminded of death as he is closer to their cultural worldview.

Research questions: When mortality threat is salient will individuals have a stronger attitude towards their beliefs and their cultural worldview?

Hypotheses: Individuals political orientation will be closer to their cultural worldview when mortality threat is salient.

Method:

How hypotheses addresses aims of study: The aim of the study is to show that thoughts of death affect our political decisions as well as general decisions and the hypotheses relates to this as it is suggesting that individuals will feel closer to the world leader which identifies with their cultural worldview the most.

Operationalised variables: 1) Mortality salience is manipulated by the word searches, ones neutral; one has death related words and 2) asked to rate world leaders on a scale about whether they are good/satisfying world leaders.

Design: The participants will be randomly assigned and the design used will be an independent sample design, as different participants will be used for the two different conditions. The independent variables are the manipulation of the mortality salience (control condition and experimental condition) and the two different world leaders. The dependent variable is the results from the rating scales of the two different world leaders.

Participants: British university students, male and female. Around 50 participants will be used.

Materials: Identification scale, two word searches, small maths calculations and profiles of the two world leaders including the rating scale.

Procedure: First of all participants will be seated and the first thing they will fill out is their gender, age and an identification scale on how British and close to their culture they feel. Then they will do a word search, however, there will be two conditions in the experiment one will be the controlled condition where participants will receive a normal word search and will not involve mortality salience, whereas, the experimental condition will involve mortality salience. After the word searches participants will work out small maths calculations, then they will receive profiles of two world leaders one is Gordon Brown England's prime minister and the other is Dmitry Medvedev Russia's president. In order to eliminate the effect of order effects I will have some profiles with Gordon Brown presented first than Dmitry Medvedev and vice versa. Participants will have to rate the statements of the world leaders on a scale indicating how strongly they feel about each one.

Ethical issues: The ethical issues in the experiment are confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity, mortality salience and the use of findings. These issues will be dealt with by gaining presumed consent, the right to withdraw from the experiment at any time and debriefing each participant at the end to make sure they are comfortable and satisfied with the information they provided. Mortality salience will be kept as minimal as possible via using a word search and a distracter task will be used afterwards to ensure that as little harm or no harm at all is caused to the participants.

Analysis of results: The results will be analysed by a 2 by 2 mixed factor Anova. The IV's are mortality salience (experimental condition and controlled condition) and the world leaders (Gordon Brown and Dmitry Medvedev).

Schedule for completion of project: Collect all data by December

Analysis of data in the Christmas break

Write up of results and report January/February till March